

Benjamin Franklin: The New American Short Guide

Benjamin Franklin: The New American by Milton Meltzer

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Contents

Benjamin Franklin: The New American Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

It is not surprising that Meltzer chose Benjamin Franklin as the subject for a biography. The author loves history. He has an abiding respect for the accomplishments of those who begin with few advantages and achieve much. Furthermore, Meltzer's special fondness for printing may have also contributed to his interest in America's most famous printer; he had already written a biography of another printer's apprentice, Mark Twain. His historical works *The American Revolutionaries: A History in Their Own Words, 1750-1800* (1987) and *George Washington and the Birth of Our Nation* (1986), provided background for Franklin's time.

For those who are accustomed to seeing Franklin as only a wise old man, it is refreshing and novel to discover the whole Benjamin Franklin, to learn about Ben the boy, who was not at all sure what he wanted to be. After several unsuccessful attempts at a career, Franklin became a printer's helper, and his early life as an apprentice is engagingly told. Certainly for young adults struggling to find a meaningful profession, Franklin's experiences are illuminating. If finding a profession was not hard enough for the youngster, Franklin's early life was definitely not a series of successes. He faced defeat as often as victory. He entered adult life broke and penniless. Every time something good happened, it seemed like victory was snatched from him. Eventually, through perseverance, Franklin did succeed, becoming one of America's most respected leaders.

About the Author

Milton Meltzer was born May 8, 1915 in Worcester, Massachusetts into a poor, hard-working Jewish family. His grandparents came from Europe, and his family life reflected the emigrant experience of America. In his 1988 memoir, *Starting From Home*, Meltzer writes with obvious affection of his family, of his childhood experiences, of some of his inspirational teachers and of his early years in Worcester where he graduated from high school.

Always an excellent student, Meltzer learned to read early in his life. He devoured books, though he could not afford to buy them. He haunted the library and traded series books with friends. Like many readers it was from the pages of books that he gathered his early heroes: from the Horatio Alger books, Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, and *The Arabian Nights* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Eventually, Meltzer happened across such works as *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and the antislavery poems of John Greenleaf Whittier.

Many of the heroes Meltzer identified with when young—Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin were just two— would re-emerge as the subjects for his books in later years.

In the depths of the Great Depression, Meltzer attended Columbia University. He had vague notions of becoming a writer, and he published a few pieces in collegiate and small magazines. After graduating from college, he was lucky enough to be able to put his writing skills to work for the WPA Federal Theater Project, which employed many artists during the Depression.

In 1941 Meltzer married Hilda Balinsky, with whom he has two daughters.

He worked at various odd jobs until he was drafted into the Army Air Force in 1942. He served as a control tower operator in the U.S., and in his spare time wrote articles for service magazines. At the end of the war he landed a job with CBS radio interviewing soldiers returning from the war. In 1946 Meltzer left CBS to work as a publicist for the unsuccessful Henry Wallace campaign for president. After the election in 1948 he continued to work as a free-lance writer and editor, producing a daily radio program for a national union and writing a column for a labor newsletter. Through the years, he has worked in a variety of capacities in public relations and as an editor.

It was not until 1956, when Meltzer was forty-one, that his first book appeared, *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*. He wrote it in collaboration with the noted black writer Langston Hughes. Between 1960 and 1968 Meltzer published thirteen books for young adults, and in 1968 he decided to become a full-time author. Once the literary dam burst, Meltzer proved to be an extraordinarily prolific writer. He has written more than seventy books, the majority for young adults. Meltzer enjoys writing for young adults; he finds kids more open to news ideas than are grownups. While Meltzer has written novels, he prefers to write history and biography.



Growing up in Massachusetts, Meltzer was surrounded by history. Although his fascination with the past did not seem to emerge until later, he still recalls an early interest in the subject. He has written biographies of blacks and women, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Jews. Writing with understanding, sensitivity and compassion, Meltzer has written about many different times, from the Depression to the Civil War to the American Revolution, and further back into history. He has written about the Civil Rights Movement and the labor movement, about the Ku Klux Klan and Hitler's Germany; about the struggle of blacks and the abolitionists in the nineteenth century, as well as biographies of such historical figures as Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, and George Washington.

Prizes and awards have been heaped on this distinguished American writer.

He has been nominated for the National Book Award five times; and has won the Christopher award, and the Jane Addams award several times.

He has also received the Carter G. Woodson, Jefferson Cup, Washington Book Guild, Olive Branch, and the Golden Kite awards. The Library of Congress has honored his work as the best Children's Book of the Year several times.

Setting

America was trembling on the eve of a tremendous upheaval; it was an exciting, turbulent era. There were Indian uprisings, and Pennsylvania, as all the colonies, had a frontier to defend.

There were wars with the French. The old order was being challenged on all fronts.

Throughout the new world of America, there swirled new and exciting ideas. There was the concept that people should be free and should be allowed to choose those who would govern them. How to solve civic problems was an issue with which Franklin was often concerned; he thought about how government could address issues of public concern yet not encroach on private freedoms. Around him, old political ideas were being scrutinized and challenged. Scientific thought was being re-examined. An intellectual explorer, Franklin was at the forefront of both social and scientific movements.

During this immensely exciting time, Franklin played a significant role in the history of Pennsylvania and the birth of the United States.



Social Sensitivity

Meltzer was a teen-ager when the Great Depression struck America. He saw firsthand the terrible toll the tragedy took on human dignity and selfrespect. No doubt this influenced his thinking on poverty.

Even earlier than that, though, he was acutely sensitive about his own poverty, although surprisingly not as aware of his Jewish background. He was more aware of being an emigrant than a Jew. But, as a college student before World War II, he became excruciatingly aware of what it meant to be a Jew.

As a result of these diverse aspects of his life, Meltzer became the quintessential writer of social causes. He often focuses upon the underdog, the disenfranchised, the outsider, the poverty stricken, and those who fought—and fight today—against injustice. He has championed the cause of many ethnic and religious minorities, abolitionists, and women. He is adept at combining his compassion for the underdog with his love of history and with his passion for justice. He has written dozens of books on slavery and the fight for equality, on Jews and their fight for survival, on pioneers in the woman's movements. Indeed, Meltzer has written about most of the minorities in the U.S. In Benjamin Franklin, Meltzer presents a portrait of another man whose compassion and hard work made him a significant historical figure. Not everything about Franklin was admirable, but Meltzer presents an honest portrait of his subject, without aggrandizing him.

Literary Qualities

Meltzer has a straightforward, unembellished writing style that makes Benjamin Franklin easy to read, while vividly portraying colonial life. He writes engagingly of Franklin's life as an apprentice, and what it was like to be in France, in revolutionary America, and in England. He is able to make clear the relationships between the events of times past and those of today.

Themes and Characters

Unlike many intellectuals of the eighteenth century, Franklin was not a rigid thinker. His philosophy developed over many years and Franklin himself said if an idea did not withstand scrutiny it should be discarded.

The humble printer never stopped learning, growing, and maturing.

Meltzer does not look just at Franklin's achievements as a statesman, politician, and diplomat, but he examines other aspects of Franklin's multifaceted career. For instance, Meltzer discusses Franklin's many and varied accomplishments as an inventor and scientist.

His work in the field of electricity and his invention of the lightning rod are two examples. Because of Franklin's importance in founding the United States, many people overlook his importance as a scientist. Except for the famous kite-flying episode in the storm, which is remembered more for Franklin's daring as he confronted the power of lightning than for its scientific merit, few people recognize Franklin as a major figure in science.

Meltzer points out more than Franklin's accomplishments. He goes deeper and examines how Franklin approached a problem, how he defined it, studied it, and developed a solution. In effect, this biography of Franklin gives an effective lesson in problem solving.

Franklin was not merely a civic leader; he was a civic problem-solver. He was instrumental in the creation of public hospitals and libraries, for instance. He founded schools. He developed plans for mundane but necessary activities such as paving streets and improving the postal system.

Franklin used diplomacy to implement his ideas. The skill he exhibited during the Constitutional Convention was developed long before, when he was a civic leader in Philadelphia and later a diplomat to Paris. In some respects, the manner in which his ideas were implemented was as important as the creation of them. Likewise, Meltzer examines Franklin's business acumen, his success in the printing field, and his innovations in publishing almanacs.

While Meltzer shows obvious affection for Franklin, he does not gloss over the aspects of Franklin's life that are less than admirable, such as Franklin owning slaves and his possible womanizing. As an objective biographer, Meltzer brings up the matter, but he points out that little solid evidence exists to substantiate or refute the charges.

The myth-makers of American history have tended to portray the Founding Fathers as simple, uncomplicated figures. While certainly single-minded in their defense of liberty, the patriots were complex thinkers with a variety of ideas. This is especially true of Franklin, whose innovative ideas were in a constant state of development.



As great as his intellectual power was, however, it is Franklin's warm and sincere personality that shines through in this book. His diplomacy did much to bring France to America's side during the Revolution. His persuasive skills were instrumental in convincing the independent colonists to unite against a common enemy. It was his skill at compromise that did much to save the United States during the bitter debate over drafting the Constitution. It is not only his ideas that proved valuable. His talent for bringing a diverse group of independent thinkers to agreement was crucial to founding a new government.

Ultimately, Franklin never lost touch—as a reading of his Poor Richard's Almanac will attest—with the common man inside himself. He had a special ability to translate complex ideas into a phrase that everyone can appreciate and usually chuckle over, making his Poor Richard's Almanac one of the best loved and most widely read publications in America.

Meltzer does an excellent job of communicating Franklin's delightful spirit to us, two hundred years later. His bringing Franklin's varied life, complex thought, and brilliant personality to the page was not an easy task. That he succeeded so well shows his skill as an historian and writer.



Topics for Discussion

1. Like many of the colonists, Franklin was a master of many trades. He was a businessman, statesman, scientist, and writer—so were Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Have times changed so that one person can no longer excel in many fields?

2. Thomas Jefferson is considered the author of the Declaration of Independence. James Madison was the major architect of our Constitution and Bill of Rights. George Washington was the dominant figure in the War for Independence. Yet Franklin is considered a major force in the founding of our country. What were his unique contributions to the establishment of the United States?

3. Meltzer calls Franklin the most accessible of our Founding Fathers.

What do you think makes Franklin so?

4. Franklin's religious belief was simple: "Serving God is doing good to man." What did he mean by that? Do you agree with him?

5. Franklin chaired a committee devoted to founding schools for blacks and Indians. He also chaired a group that was opposed to slavery. He championed freedom for colonists; yet he owned slaves himself. How do you suppose he reconciled this?

6. What value is there in reading a biography of a man who was active two hundred ago?

7. Franklin and his son became estranged over America's struggle for independence. Benjamin was on the side of the colonists; his son was an avid Tory, supporting loyalty to England. Because of this split they did not speak to each other for years. Are there issues so important that son and father should refuse to acknowledge each other? Or are family relationships the more important?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. By today's standards, Franklin had little education, yet he was a well-educated and wise man. What are the differences between education, knowledge, and wisdom? How does Franklin represent these?

2. "We think of Benjamin Franklin," says Meltzer, "as one of the first modern men." Do you agree with that assessment? If so, what makes Franklin "modern?"

3. Franklin did not patent his many inventions, believing they should be freely available to the public. What are the advantages, as well as the disadvantages, of this idea?

4. Meltzer sums up Franklin's philosophy this way: "Progress, Ben came to believe, was not a gift from Heaven.

He could shape a goal for himself, and advance towards it, armed by faith in himself and in the power of the mind".

What do you think of that philosophy?

Does it have application in the twentieth century?

5. Carl Van Doren wrote that Franklin was "a harmonious human multitude." What do you think of that description? Is it apt?

6. Why did the author subtitle his book *The New American*? In what sense could Franklin be considered a new American?

Related Titles

Meltzer has written three other titles dealing with early American life, *George Washington and the Birth of Our Nation* (1986), *The American Revolutionaries: A History in Their Own Words, 1750-1800* (1987), and *The Bill of Rights: How We Got It and What It Means* (1990).

It is interesting to contrast the aristocratic Virginian, George Washington, with the plebeian Franklin. *The American Revolutionaries* is of value in providing firsthand accounts of how the colonists viewed their turbulent times.

It gives a good view of the era in which Franklin lived and the issue of civil rights. *The Bill of Rights: How We Got It and What It Means* examines the Bill of Rights from an historical perspective, relating it to current challenges.

For Further Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography and Other Writing*. Edited by Kenneth Silverman. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Pages could be filled listing different editions of the works of Benjamin Franklin. This and the following book are two excellent introductory volumes to Franklin's writings.

———. *Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography and Other Writings*. Edited by Jessie L. Lemish. New York: Signet, 1961.

Provides a good cross section of Franklin's work, including *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Meltzer, Milton. *Starting From Home: A Writer's Beginnings*. New York: Viking/Penguin, 1988. A sensitive memoir of Meltzer's life in Worcester, Massachusetts, through his high school years.

———. "The Fractured Image: Distortions in Children's History Books."

School Library Journal (October 1968).

Meltzer examines history books that ignore such atrocities as the Holocaust.

Osborne, Mary Pope. *The Many Lives of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Dial, 1990. A recent excellent biography for young adults.

Van Doren, Carl. *Benjamin Franklin*.

New York: Viking, 1938. Probably still the definitive Franklin biography.

Copyright Information

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